

The Building of the Church Among Village Communities

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GEOGRAPHY

Sixty to eighty years ago, when the three American Presbyterian Missions in India were crystallizing into separate organizations, each took the name of the most prominent town within its own bounds. Thus the Mission in the Punjab became "The Ludhiana Mission." That now known as the Western India Mission was called "The Kolhapur Mission." The North India Mission was then not improperly called "The Furrukhabad Mission." But railways have made or ruined cities in India, even as in Western lands. Furrukhabad City has been left on the map, it is true; but it has been eclipsed by Cawnpore, Allahabad and Jhansi, which have got on to nearly all the main lines running north and south, east and west, while Furrukhabad is struggling for a diminishing prestige on a couple of branch lines.

Ten or twelve years ago, when the three Missions were re-christened, the Punjab people and the Western India people found their names in the geography. Punjab and Western India Missions they were and could be nothing else; but not so the North India Mission. It was not East; it was not North; and it was a long way from the center. Several names were suggested, but the spirit of compromise prevailed, and we settled upon the inaccurate and unpoetic name, "North India Mission."

POPULATION

The North India Mission is in two great alluvial valleys of the Ganges and Jumna Rivers, the most densely populated rural portion, and the most typically Indian portion of India, and with an unshared responsibility for the Presbyterian Church, U. S. A., of seven millions of people.

Here the castes and the sub-castes are nearly all represented, and, as to be expected in so dense a population, social lines are very rigidly drawn. Here, to be a Brahman means much, and to be an outcaste would be unspeakably terrible if the people themselves regarded it so, but the outcastes each have a caste or sub-caste upon which they look down, and so even the lowest have contrived to maintain a certain self-respect.

A RETROSPECT

The work which I shall attempt to describe had its beginnings twenty-two years ago. Then there were fewer Indian ministers, fewer Christian teachers, fewer local Church officers, and fewer Church members at the end of the twenty-two years than at the beginning.

Our Mission gatherings were times of heart searching. In a gathering of young missionaries, one brother caught a momentary vision and prayed the Lord for a large gathering of souls; and, after a little hesitation, he said, "O Lord, a thousand this year." Then, almost in a sob, he continued, "Canst Thou trust us with so many?" But we had no sooner got off our knees than the brother was conscience smitten for having presumed to ask for so many. At first we were all a bit stunned, but we soon recovered; and a thousand souls that year, and that God would make us good enough and wise enough to care for them, became a regular petition in our prayers.

The way seemed closed among caste people. Brahman organization had beaten us to a standstill, and apparently our only chance for an answer to that prayer was from among the untouchables. The Bhangis appealed to us. They were socially at the bottom, the lowest of the low; but they were more self-respecting than some others, and less debased morally. However, Hindu social organization had placed them at the bottom and had apparently crushed out of them all aspirations for anything different.

Among these Bhangis some of us began work in real earnest. At our first annual "round-up" we had baptized only about one-half the number we had been asking for. Maybe our faith was only half as large as our asking. It was, however, a beginning of larger things.

Twenty-two years ago we had all told a Christian community of nine hundred and forty three. Today the growth is fully seven hundred per cent, while the village work has grown out of nothing into a village Christian community numbering twenty-three thousand five hundred.

The village Christians have been organized into eighty-nine churches, thirteen of which have developed into complete organizations, and a number of the remaining seventy-six are complete in form, awaiting only the ordination ceremony of elders, which is occurring as rapidly as the men prove themselves worthy.

The old-time preachers and teachers were by training and tradition not adapted to the new work. They had no confidence in the outcome of the people, and, with here and there a noble exception, they had no liking for the insult and humiliation they were called upon to endure for the sake of their people. For it is literally true that every real servant of an outcaste people must be-

come an outcaste himself. I was once teaching a number of Christians when one of my audience was called away to answer questions. "Who is this Bhangi European?" "Your honor, he is our 'Padri,' our missionary." "Was he a Bhangi in his own land?" "No, your honor, he was at least a swine herd" (the caste just higher). Both questions and answers reveal the utter inability of either Hindu or Christian to understand our position or our motives. If the Christian had said, "Oh no, he was a great sahib in his own land," aside from its being a solace to wounded pride, it would have revealed the fact that he knew we were down with him to lift him up.

The Indian minister, by reason of his greater susceptibility and because of the infinitely more brutal treatment he has to endure, is the real sufferer. Many of our very good men could not stand it, and were soon found to be seeking more congenial employment elsewhere. Only an occasional saint of high caste origin has really become a Bhangis to the Bhangis.

THE SOLUTION

The solution is ministers and teachers from among the people themselves. But an adequate village school system in such a work must precede an adequate ministry and teaching staff. Of the Christians in these villages, scarcely one could read till Christianity gave them their chance. Even so they do not show much eagerness, and most of them doubt their ability till we convince them that they can learn.

We have had schools from the first, but until recently scarcely one had succeeded. Teachers have complained that the pupils would not attend, and pupils have complained that the teachers did not teach. Causes for failure may be summed up in

three sentences: First, little desire on the part of teachers for their disreputable work; second, little interest on the part of pupils and parents; and third, opposition on the part of caste people, to outcastes learning to read, such opposition resulting in aggravated cases, in head-breaking affairs. The dilemma, briefly stated, was precisely this: We could have no schools without teachers from among the people themselves, and we could not make teachers without schools. It was a desperate situation, and it was by inspiration that we found a way out. Station after station began to start little training schools into which a dozen or more bright young leaders were brought. They were preferably married men. They were paid a stipend of about \$2 a month. Upon the completion of a four years' course in the Bible and in reading, writing and arithmetic, and a short course in theology, they were turned back into the work of preacher-teachers, and a useful lot of men they have proved themselves to be.

These training schools have been consolidated into one school. The best of these preacher-teachers we are sending on to our Theological Seminary at Saharanpur, where, after a two years' course, they are returned to us with village-pastor certificates. These village-pastors and preacher-teachers are gradually solving our greatest difficulty. Natural gifts and downright earnestness sometimes make up for lack of early opportunity. Among these village pastors is an occasional man who compares favorably in point of ability with our higher grade Seminary graduates. Such men are receiving ordination and are being installed as pastors. Others, upon receiving calls from village churches or groups of churches, are receiving a temporary license which, with us, makes them vice-moderators of their church sessions under the missionary, and gives them the right to solemnize mar-

riages and to administer the sacraments only, however, so long as they remain connected with the church or group of churches calling them. This license, however, does not give them a standing in Presbytery. Thus all the needs of our village churches are being met, at least in so far as men of this low grade can do it; and, at the same time, we are not ordaining numbers of men who in years to come would be out of place in our Presbyteries, and who are not likely to continue many years really acceptable among the churches. Moreover, men of far better training will be required, if we are to expect continued progress in our village community life.

MAKING THE SCHOOLS BETTER

Among these village Christians there are at a low estimate eight or nine thousand children of school age. We need to make our present schools better, and as soon as possible to open schools for the remaining seven-eighths of our village Christian children. Then, as children outgrow the village schools, we should have more advanced schools in convenient centers for them to graduate into, thus leading right on up to our station high schools, and our high schools should be turning the choicest and best, literally by the hundred, into our Theological Seminary. Such a program is not one bit too ambitious. For years to come we will need every good man we can lay hands on for this growing Christian community, and even if we should some day catch up with the needs of our Christian community, there is always waiting for us the other millions, for whom we, as a Mission, are responsible. Even an army of evangelists would not much more than touch the fringe of these multitudes in this generation.

COMING EN MASSE

At the start we had no idea of this work becoming a mass movement. But we soon discovered that the people would come en masse or not at all. They have been drawn in upon themselves by a harsh and unsympathetic outside world till the brotherhood has become a sacred thing. They come to us in large numbers, and if they leave us at any time, they will leave in the same way. The old brotherhood will in time give place to a really Christian brotherhood, but it will be even then a brotherhood knitting them very closely together.

All relinquishing of ancient rites and practices and acceptance of Christian rites has been the product of brotherhood councils. The minister or missionary who has not found a way of influencing or leading them en masse will not get very far with them.

After they have become Christians, the first struggle with them has usually been to get the women to attend services with the men. This can be accomplished, but only through an organization in which the leading men or "CHAUDHRIES" representing the people are won over to our side.

THE KEY TO THE SITUATION

It is pretty generally accepted among mass movement workers that the Chaudhries are the key to nearly every situation. We, being Presbyterians, call them "KASIS," or Elders; and the organization of these Elders in a given group we call the Session. Whether one name be used or the other, it is the same thing. It is local church government by means of Ruling Elders.

In earlier days our Presbyteries were doubtful about the outcome of this work. The attitude was such that it was found im-

practicable to organize churches or to admit the people to the communion. It was an anomalous condition of things. Thousands had been admitted to the sacrament of baptism who had been denied participation in the Lord's Supper. For years there appeared no remedy.

Other defects arising out of this attitude of Presbyteries were remedied in the Christian Endeavor organization. It was discovered that the committee phase of Christian Endeavor was capable of surprising developments. Soon there began to be committees of leading men who performed practically the function of Ruling Elders. A standing committee of Presbytery was appointed with power. They made a circuit of the Presbytery and received into the communion such believers as could pass creditable examinations in Christian knowledge, but the Christian Endeavor Elder was not recognized. However, bands of believers, who had satisfied the committee as to their religious knowledge, were organized into local groups without Elders, known as imperfectly organized churches. But local government, through leading men, was here to stay. Many of these leading men were not even church members, but they were needed just to hold things together.

In the station with which the writer is most familiar, these men are initiated into the office of "NAIB," or sub-ruling Elder, by an appropriate ceremony not amounting to ordination. And, so far as possible, regular session meetings are being held.

THE OUTLOOK

This village work has never more than nominally become linked up with the Presbytery. The churches know their missionary and they know their pastors, but their notion of the Presbytery and their proper

relation to it is vague. The Presbytery, moreover, has not adapted itself in the least to village needs. One might say, without fear of exaggeration, that though submerged in this large village community, the Presbytery as such is scarcely conscious of it. There are reasons for this which I must not take time to more than sum up in two or three brief sentences, to wit, that though the Presbytery is overwhelmingly Indian in membership, yet it is essentially American. The ministers have grown familiar with its business routine. They know its forms and love them and are loath to change.

There was an effort recently to split this Presbytery up into three smaller Presbyteries, but that failed. Another project was to have the village workers in each district and the village elders set apart as a Commission to deal with all matters relating to the village work of that district and to report annually to Presbytery for review. Should this succeed, our aim in this district is to organize the Commission precisely as a Presbytery; to call it a Presbytery and to think of it ourselves as a Presbytery, with the confidence that when it has served its apprenticeship as a Commission it will come into its own and be set apart as a Presbytery. Meanwhile, it, too, will be doing its work about as well as a real Presbytery would do it.

There is still another rather important item for consideration which, however, has not found its place in the scheme of this article. When we organized these bands of believers or churches, we tried to organize at convenient centers, geographically. This is found now to have been a mistake. In almost every instance it has done violence to the old brotherhood boundaries. Sometimes it has broken the old brotherhood into five or six parts so that no one church has separate liberty of action. We

are now regrouping, so as to make the churches coincide with brotherhood lines. In a large "JAMAAT" several churches are subject to a single session covering its entire territory. In a few instances we have merged smaller churches. In one district eight such churches were merged and were struck from the Presbyterial roll. In a few cases it was found that the church was organized with people from two or more Jamaats. Of course, that had to be remedied, and was easily done.

Preaching the Gospel has all along taken first place in our thought and effort. We have firmly believed in the power and efficiency of the Gospel to save and lift these people, and we have not believed in much else. Yet it is equally true that if these other things pertaining to life and organization had not been studiously met, the Gospel message might never have impinged upon their needy and helpless lives.

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